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Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion

Edited by
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Sheila Greeve Davaney

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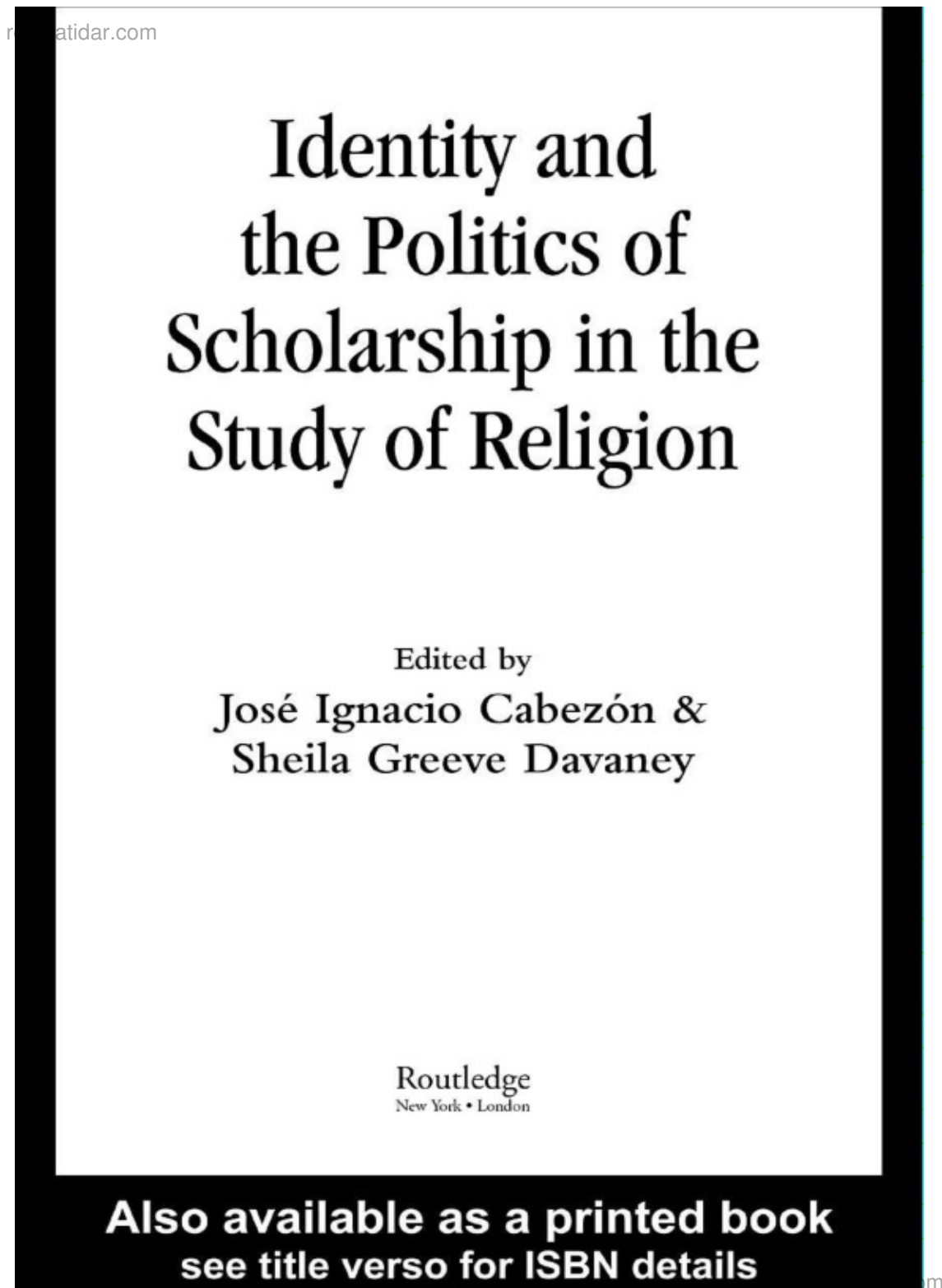
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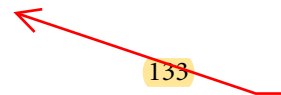




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CONTENTS

	Introduction	1
	JOSÉ IGNACIO CABEZÓN and SHEILA GREEVE DAVANEY	
Chapter 1	Between Identity and Footnotes	25
	SHEILA GREEVE DAVANEY	
Chapter 2	Identity and the Work of the Scholar of Religion	43
	JOSÉ IGNACIO CABEZÓN	
Chapter 3	Religious Identity and the Study of Buddhism	61
	FRANCISCA CHO	
Chapter 4	Following in the Footnotes of the Apostle Paul	77
	PAMELA EISENBAUM	
Chapter 5	Neither Here nor There: Crossing Boundaries, Becoming Insiders, Remaining Catholic	99
	FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, S.J.	
Chapter 6	Religious Identity, Scholarship, and Teaching Religion	113
	RITA M. GROSS	
Chapter 7	Balancing Acts: Negotiating the Ethics of Scholarship and Identity	133
	TAZIM R. KASSAM	



In this section author deals
with how his Satpanth
background and present
Muslim religion have
shaped his scholarly work



2004 -Identity and Politics of Scholarship in Study of Religion -Relevant Pages (694)

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vi • Contents

Chapter 8	Post-Holocaust Jewish Identity and the Academy: On Traveling the Diaspora and the Experience of the Double Standard MARC H. ELLIS	163
Chapter 9	Being John Woodroffe: Some Mythical Reflections on the Postcolonial Study of Hindu Tantra JEFFREY J. KRIPAL	183
Chapter 10	Identity as an Intellectual Problem KWASI WIREDU	209
Contributors		229
Index		233

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140 • Tazim R. Kassam

Mombasa recalls the mouthwatering aromas of Arab *halva* and *kahawa*, Kisumu, the scent of Indian spices and sweets, and Nairobi, the smell of British doughnuts and scones. In my childhood imagination, I roamed with my maternal grandfather in the forests of Ayodhya with Ram and Sita just as easily as I played with Enid Blyton's *Famous Five on a Treasure Island*.

My earliest recollection of a place from which my sense of community, identity, and belonging evolved was the Ismaili *jamatkhana* (lit. place of congregation; prayer hall). With the exception of meals and bedtime, no routine was more constant in our family than washing up, getting dressed, and attending religious services daily at sunrise and sunset in the *jamatkhana*. In this space filled with smoky, fragrant incense, the devotional singing of Ginans, the celebration of Eid ul-Fitr and Imam Day, the offerings of fruit and spicy dishes, and brightly colored saris, topis, and shawls, I caught on to threads of the places I was from. My forebears had been Hindus who had converted to Satpanth Ismailism many centuries ago in India; I belonged to the Khoja Ismaili Muslim community, which had its own multiracial schools and hospitals and whose spiritual leader was Hazir Imam, known to the public as His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV. I learned from the *farmans* (lit. decrees, guidance) of Hazir Imam read out daily in *jamatkhana*s that the two most important goals in life for me were to practice my faith regularly and to get an education. My parents were very active in *jamatkhana* and served for several years as *mukhi* and *mukhiyani*, voluntary officials appointed by the Aga Khan through his councils to lead daily religious services.

Life changed suddenly when dictator General Idi Amin expelled the Asians from Uganda in 1972. Talk spread about the violence and killing. Although no one thought the unrest would spread to Kenya, most Asians in East Africa were afraid. Many Indian families had relatives living in Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya. A few years before the unrest, a very close friend of my father, Nurdin Hassanali Sajan, his wife, and two little sons had been hacked to pieces with *pangas* (scythes) and machetes in their home on the outskirts of Nairobi. I still vividly recall the funeral. Frightened, I sat beside my father as he recited prayers in front of the four bodies, whose faces were slashed beyond recognition.

This tragedy greatly affected my father and created concerns about our future in Kenya. In 1973, leaving behind our unsold flat, furniture, and beloved dog, we left Kenya for good. The departure was sudden. We had to leave immediately after receiving approval for Canadian immigration. We packed a few suitcases and left for Canada via London. It

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as I argued in my book, allowed for generous tolerance, respect, and coexistence of common spiritual and ethical ideals. The “accusations” that Satpanth Ismailis accepted Hindu teachings (or that the Fatimids drew on Greek thought, or that the Aga Khan’s followers were too Europeanized, and variations thereof) astonished and angered me because, though I might not have been able to articulate this at the time, I vaguely recognized that these criticisms were a tacit rejection of the very notion of pluralism and creativity within Islamic traditions.

At first, the very question, namely, how could symbols and concepts drawn from the Hindu and Muslim milieu cohere together, made no sense to me. It seemed perfectly natural to be tucked in with bedtime stories, to hear episodes of the Ramayana from my grandfather, and to be woken up by my father reciting the daily Arabic *du’a* in Qur’anic cadences. These colorful threads coexisted de facto in a harmonious, integral way, so why did I have to choose between them and give up one for the other? As a result of this exposure to multiple traditions, I found the ethos of religious fundamentalisms, certain reductionist forms of identity politics, and the ideologies of modern “isms” (nationalism, capitalism, globalism, etc.) to be oppressive, rigid, and suffocating.

When I began my work on Ginans, I was primarily interested in the poetry, ritual, and aesthetics of religious life. Ginan recitations were not restricted to *jamatkhanas*. There used to be Ginan *mushairas* or *mehfils* (concerts) at people’s homes and during festivals and celebrations. When I lived in Kenya, every other weekend we seemed to be at music parties or Ginan *mushairas*, since my father was a widely sought-after singer. Ginan cassettes were played in the car and at home. At picnics, we would sing Geets, Gayans, and Garbis (inspired by Gujarati folk songs with devotional content), and play *dandia raas* (stick dance) or perform the *garba* dance in a circle. This singing and music formed a kind of security blanket that kept us warm, nourished, and happy, especially in our new adopted lands, and provided emotional reminders of a common bond. As the daughter of a famous Ginan singer and a lover of music, I was also drawn to this devotional poetry (and to the Sant tradition in India as a whole) because of its simultaneous tolerance and humorous critique of outward forms of religious practice. There were Ginans that debunked the straitjacketed Muslim *mullah* as well as the puritanical Hindu *pandit* yet preached *bhakti* or devotion to a God whose name, Ram or Raheman, did not matter but who heard and responded to hymns from the heart. Beyond the music and poetry, I was interested in how the Satpanth Ismaili tradition had articulated and shaped the daily religious life, everyday ethics, and social exchanges of South Asian Ismailis.



by the Satpanth Ismailis on the Indian subcontinent. One of the earliest *pirs* (preacher, poet-saint) who composed the Ginans developed a unique script called Khojki to record the songs, a script known only among the few literate religious-specialist families of Khoja Ismailis. To appreciate their need for secrecy, one needs to know the history of the Ismailis. Among minority Shi'a groups, Ismailis have been one of the most persecuted and maligned sects within Islam. Like other Shi'a Muslims oppressed at various times by the Sunni majorities, for many centuries they had to practice *taqiyya*, or dissimulation, to hide their true identity as a way of protecting themselves in hostile environments. The Ginans were hence part of a historical tradition of assimilation and concealment and a strategy for survival in the face of adverse circumstances. For centuries, not only was a special script known only to its members devised for its written transmission, but the performance and oral transmission of the Ginans were confined within the community. Access to this body of literature, especially original manuscripts, continues to be restricted. Hence, for the most part, scholars who have done research and published on the Ginans have been Ismailis. From an academic standpoint, therefore, the first advantage of being a participant within a tradition is simply one of having access, even if it is tightly controlled access, to the sacred texts and religious practices of a community.

Given this experience of being a minority under attack at various times in various places, Ismailis have learned to be self-protective, circumspect, and politically astute. They are particularly careful for both ethical and practical reasons not to offend or provoke others. Under these circumstances, to be an Ismaili scholar who examines and writes about religious texts, practices, or institutions from a historical-critical perspective can be fraught with problems. A broader parallel might be seen in terms of Muslim scholars who must come to terms with the feelings of those Muslims who resist any form of self-disclosure, critique, or introspection, especially in a climate where the dominant culture is already Islamophobic and intolerant of Muslims. Indeed, the issue of representation that Muslims face in hostile environments where they live as minorities is the very issue that I sought to tackle with Ismailis living as a minority within the Islamic world and the Indian subcontinent. The scholar is thus in an impossible situation catalyzing a state of "anxious subjectivities" (an expression coined by the editors of this volume): on the one hand wanting to speak up for the minority or marginalized community, but on the other hand, in the very act of doing so, bringing it under unwanted scrutiny. Ironically, my desire to give voice to the Ginan



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158 • Tazim R. Kassam

matter. Arguably, the most vibrant identities at personal and societal levels are dynamic, contextual, and constantly negotiated and interrogated. Reductive forms of identity politics often emerge from desperate attempts to find a one-size-fits-all solution to real or perceived threats to the self. But individuals and communities do not have to embrace the notion of either/or and to assume that they must operate within a totalizing, essentialist framework or run the risk of falling into a radically destabilizing and fragmentary one. Identities that are secure tend to be multidimensional, complex, and resilient, so that in times of radical change, aspects that help adapt to those circumstances get asserted. The ideal of *e pluribus unum* applies as much to the individual as to society. We have many tongues in our hearts, some of which we do not ourselves know. As Julia Kristeva explores in *Strangers to Ourselves*,¹³ delving into the memory of history and culture may make us embark on a path to recognition of the strangers yet to be discovered within ourselves. In a very practical sense, keeping alive the plurality of multiple selves, approaching them as unique and fascinating, is a survival strategy both for individuals and communities.

CONCLUSION

Ironically, my work was trying to show the creativity and inventiveness of the Satpanth Ismaili Muslim tradition within the context of South Asia. The multivalence of symbols in the Ginans drawn from Indic and Perso-Arabic sources served the nascent Ismaili community in South Asia not only as a fount of inspiration and divine knowledge but also as a strategy of survival and renewal, resilience and adaptation, in that historical encounter over eight centuries ago. To forget this legacy out of fear, deliberately to neglect it, and to silence works such as mine is to concede victory to those who want to whitewash diverse Islamic societies of the elements they have absorbed and synthesized from many cultures. It is also to fail to resist ideological notions of religious life. The consequence of marginalizing such areas of research is to let them die out of sheer neglect. Is there not a moral imperative to tell the stories of those whom scholarship has ignored and whose communities might, even for legitimate reasons, want to suppress, forget, or erase?

When I published the book, I not only thought that I was making a contribution to scholarship but also felt I was giving something back to the beloved community that shaped me. I began my scholarly career full of hopes and aspirations to foster appreciation of this tradition and to preserve what was being submerged or denied. For

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